NOTAS

THE FUNCTION OF EXPECTATION IN DICKENS' *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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I find myself at each reading of *Great Expectations* more and more interested in Dickens' play with that most human phenomenon, expectation. What does Dickens expect the common reader to expect of Pip? What do the characters in the novel expect of Pip? The answers to these questions are not always the same.

If we use the word *expectation* in the singular and as a verb, we quickly see that Dickens has planned to explore the phenomenon by priming the reader to expect something of Pip because others do. In contrast to our own expectations of what Pip will do with all his new-found wealth, which are aroused at the end of the First Part, the early instances of the phenomenon deal with its moral connotations, as when Joe Gargery responds to Pip's lying about the oppulence of Satis House by declaring, «This won't do, old fellow! I say! Where do you *expect* to go» (p. 99, my italics).[1]

The novel starts off with Pip's encountering Magwitch in the churchyard where Pip's parents and siblings are buried. The escaped convict frightens Pip into pilfering some food and drink from his sister's larder. Pip delivers the refreshment to Magwitch at dawn of what we soon discover is Christmas Day. Later that day, Pip returns to the churchyard, this time in the company of soldiers in hot pursuit of the escaped convict. When Magwitch is apprehended, Pip catches the convict's eye and tries «to assure him of (his) innocence» (p. 69). And Magwitch comes to understand just this. The boy did not inform on him. Pip remained true to his word and told no one of the escaped convict in the churchyard. Guilty of theft in his own eyes, Pip imagines the steers which suddenly appear out of the phantasmagoric fog of the Gravesend marshes to low «Halloa,

young thief» (p. 48) as he skulks on his way. Yet he wishes to remain innocent of betrayal in Magwitch's eyes. Thus Magwitch concludes that Pip is a loyal and generous child, and when Magwitch next sees Pip, sixteen years later, the proscribed convict tells him, «You acted nobly, my boy... Noble Pip! And I have never forgot it!». And because he expects Pip to continue to act nobly, he settles on him his «great expectations.»

Still other estimates of Pip's moral character are rendered by the adult world and on that very day. At Christmas dinner, Pip is casually and roundly berated by his sister's guests, all of whom are respected elders of the town. Mrs. Hubble, for instance, addresses herself to the assembled diners, while «contemplating [Pip] with a mournful presentiment that [he] should come to no good... 'Why is it that the young are never grateful'» (p. 57). Her spouse neatly cuts this Gordian knot by observing simply that the young are «'naterally wicious.' Everybody then murmured 'True!' and looked at Pip in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner».

So what can be said of these unsolicited opinions which the adults hold of Pip? Simply, that they are qualitative judgments that concern themselves with Pip's present behavior as well as the long-range moral development of his character. It should also be noted that even though mutually contradictory these expectations of Pip are accurate and do set the parameters of his moral growth. The expectations of Magwitch and of the town elders outline the questions the reader is supposed to ask about the development of Pip's character. Can Pip be both innocent and guilty, generous and ungrateful, faithful and disloyal, a boring snob and a natural nobleman? Yes, he can. And the unfolding of the narrative describes when, how, and to what degree he can be any and all of those things.

But the reader's expectations of a moral drama are soon deflected by Pip's visits to Satis House and by his confession to Biddy that he «admires» Estella «dreadfully» and that he wants «to be a gentleman on her account» (p. 166). When in the very next and final chapter of the First Part Pip's confession is followed by the news of his «great expectations», the change in narrative direction is confirmed in the reader. No longer does the reader regard the present tense, on which ground Pip's moral battles must be fought, as the prime focus of attention. Instead, he looks to the future for some fairyland where Pip and Estella can meet as lord and lady in love forever. Suddenly, that puzzling eccentric, Miss Havisham, takes on recognizable outlines. She still remains a problematic figure, but she is now bracketed by familiar characters found in fairy tales. She may be an old witch of a fairy-tale stepmother or really a benevolent fairy godmother in disguise. Perhaps she is both, as Morgan le Fay is for Gawain. And Estella comes into focus as the «prize...reserved» for Pip, if he succeeds in his ritual quest to obtain gentility for himself. The reader's expectations of the narrative suddenly turn away from the moral expectations raised in the first half of Part One and toward the

expectations of fairy-tale romance. This shift is triggered by Pip's now having at his disposal «the stupendous power of money» (p. 178).

Curiously enough, the very same respectable burghers who help the reader think of Pip in terms of moral expectations switch tracks the moment they hear of his coming into a «handsome property.» Pip now becomes an object of veneration to the Hubbles, to tailor Trabb and his boy, and most of all to Mr. Pumblechook, who wants to share in Pip's limelight. Their apostasy is as abject as it is sudden. For when they abandon the moral perspectives they had of Pip, the good burghers clearly imply that strict moral judgment is reserved for the poor boy, while the youngster with great expectations is absolved. The rich boy does not have the anxiety of proving his moral worth, for his wealth already bespeaks it. And it becomes clear why the socially-ambitious Mrs. Joe allowed the good burghers to berate her seven-year-old brother for his being «naterally wicious.» They are her moral superiors because social superiors; hence, they have the right to preach to Pip.

So Dickens includes the reactions of the respectable burghers to help the reader interpolate fairy-tale expectations into Pip's autobiography without Pip's suggesting such a reading. Notice that the fairy-tale projection can be made only if the reader rejects any identification with the burghers' abject reverence of Pip's new-found wealth. This is because the reader knows something the burghers do not, namely, that Pip loves Estella and wishes to be a gentleman «on her account.» The burghers love the money, while the reader loves love, which is what he hopes Pip will secure with the money. Yet what the two attitudes have in common is their belief in the «stupendous power of money» to procure happiness. And what the reader wants is Pip's happiness, while the question of goodness comes to seem quaint and fades into the background with Joe and Biddy. By so exaggerating the burghers' gross adoration of wealth, Dickens pushes the reader to reject their crass perspective and to opt for an alternative, more genteel, view of Pip's wealth. This genteel perspective is the fairy-tale projected into the mass of narrative events that make up the «plot.»

Dickens purposefully elicits fairy-tale expectations by arousing typical cultural responses in his reader. Thus, when Dickens makes Pip earnest, patient in adversity, one who seeks education in the name of social betterment and social betterment in the name of love, he makes him worthy of transformation into a gentleman. The money comes with the position, of course, and in Pip's case is only an accelerated means to that end. In fact, this is precisely the set of cultural assumptions reflected in Magwitch's declaration to Pip early in the Third Part: «Not that a gentleman like you couldn't win 'em off [Estella's eye and heart] of his own game; but money shall back you!» (p. 338). And this is the kind of sentiment Dickens counts on his reader to share. Position, power, and love

join hands and nod casually in the direction of money, without which none of the three would ever be realized!

Dickens so arranges his text that the reader's expectation of wish-fulfilling events creates a parallel or implicit narrative, a kind of sub-text, which runs along-side the main or explicit narrative. The critical term «sub-text» brings with it the notion of a hidden text meant to subvert the main text, which must use perforce the idiom and narrative modes sanctioned by established power. Well, Dickens' teasing the reader into projecting a fairy tale into the narrative does something like that, with the major exception, however, that this «sub-text» is designed to delude, not illuminate, the common reader. Since the fairy-tale projection, then, is the text that subscribes to the cultural myths of the empowered class, the only way the reader's highest interest can be served by the fairy-tale «sub-text» is by its collapse. This is why the text works to discourage the formation of fairy-tale expectations at the same time that it arouses such expectations in the reader.

So Dickens slowly impedes the realization of fairy-tale expectations by removing the possibilities of such wish-fulfillment and by moving into their place other, more mundane, situations. Thus, when the penultimate chapter of Part One furnishes Pip with his great expectations, the reader waits for Part Two to show Pip capitalizing on his good fortune by sweeping Estella off her feet. Instead, Pip uses his wealth to help Herbert Pocket gain for himself the love of his life. He even helps Wemmick to pair off. Clearly, his money and position have not helped Pip to Estella's heart. Yet Dickens keeps alive the possibility of the fairy tale when he has Pip return home to visit his «patroness». As long as Pip calls Miss Havisham his patroness, the reader can continue to see Miss Havisham as his fairy godmother and Estella his future princess. But what Dickens gives with one hand, he takes away with the other. For Pip's very next visit to Satis House is a bitter and disappointing one. Pip discovers the enmity that has developed between Miss Havisham and Estella when he witnesses Miss Havisham's jealousy-ridden attack on Estella's heartlessness. Miss Havisham emerges as «mortally...diseased» in spirit. And Pip comes to see, as well, that Estella was «set to wreak Miss Havisham's revenge on men» and that he formed part of their plan. He comes to see how he was purposely «tormented» even while «the prize was reserved» for him (p. 328).

The passage is worth rehearsing because it makes clear that Dickens wishes to keep alive the expectations which a fairy-tale romance would arouse in the reader when he has Pip describe Estella as the «prize... reserved for me.» There is still another reason why this scene is worth a close look. Note that the tone of Pip's moral disgust with Havisham and Estella seems to preclude the possibility of his ever participating in their cruel and self-destructive game again. Not that he does not still love

Estella. It is just that Pip assumed he was something more than their pawn. His disappointment in them effaces his image of Miss Havisham as his «patroness» because it is finally clear that she has never had his welfare in mind.

Thus it should be clear to the reader that if Pip rejects Miss Havisham on moral grounds as «diseased», then he also rejects her as his «patroness» and the whole constellation of fairy-tale possibilities surrounding Pip's relation with Estella and Miss Havisham must end in disaster. Just to make sure, Dickens arranges for Magwitch to turn up in the very next (and final) chapter of the Second Part to announce himself Pip's own true benefactor. Pip, then, should be prepared by virtue of his own bitter experience to face the hard facts of life. And he is. But is the reader? Most likely not, for Dickens so arranges the plot that the reader has continually at hand the option of misreading, of pursuing the fairy-tale expectations and not the moral ones, even when the moral has just been made to prevail. Of course, Dickens knows which set of expectations the reader will choose in weaving his own narrative, and he is prepared to tickle the reader's fancy.

So Dickens plants yet another fairy-tale possibility to inveigle the reader onward into the Third Part of the novel. For no sooner does Magwitch reveal himself to Pip than another fairy-tale solution to his torment over Estella suggests itself. Here in their very first conversation, Magwitch intuits Pip's state:

> 'And, dear boy, how good-looking you have
> growed! There's bright eyes somewheres—eh!
> Isn't there bright eyes somewheres, wot
> you love the thoughts on?'
> O Estella, Estella!
> They shall be yourn, dear boy, if money
> can buy'em. Not that a gentleman like
> you, can't win 'em off of his own game;
> but money shall back you!' (p. 338)

A new configuration begins to take shape. Magwitch, already his benefactor, lays even stronger claim to Pip: «Look'ee here, Pip! I'm your second father. You're my son—more to me nor any son» (p. 337). Magwitch emerges, then, as a kind of fairy godfather, filling the void left by Miss Havisham's abrupt dismissal from a similar post. Then, when the activities of Wemmick and Pocket reveal that Estella is Magwitch's daugther, the new constellation is complete. Pip is Magwitch's fairy child, Estella his biological child. Their destinies seem entwined and in the closest way possible, the family. And once again «the stupendous power of money» plays its part in helping the reader project a magical fairy-tale

resolution to Pip's problem: «if money can buy 'em [Estella's eye and heart]..........money shall back you!»

This projected fairy tale configuration falls apart, too, because it must. Usually, in a Dickens novel revelations of consanguinity produce happy endings, as in *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist.* If they produce sad endings, as in the revelation of a father-son relation between Smike and Ralph Nickleby, it is because one of the individuals deserves no better. So, here, in *Great Expectations*, as well, Estella, who is incapable of any warm feeling at all let alone familial ones, is never re-united with her father. The possibility of a happy family being created never materializes. Estella marries Bentley Drummle, and Magwitch's fortune is confiscated by the Crown. The money to back Pip's pursuit of Estella disappears.

Dickens has so arranged the course of events that the fairy-tale possibility only suggests itself in the presence of that «stupendous power of money.» And when the course of events knocks out the fairy-tale narrative as a possibility, it is because the power of money to realize the fairy tale has shriveled up. Thus to dismantle the fairy tale is to challenge the middle-class socio-economic myths that motivate such fantasizing. This must be why neither Miss Havisham nor Abel Magwitch are entitled to be fairy godparents, for they each clearly subscribe to the middle-class equations between money and power, power and right. What both of them want, after all, is vengeance, or as Magwitch puts it, «recompense.» Both Magwitch and Miss Havisham assume that privileged individuals, such as their wards, Pip and Estella, can become monuments to the invulnerability neither of them ever possessed. Money and position are to be used to pay old debts. The finer the lady Estella becomes, the greater the heartbreaker she becomes, the greater the vengeance she will wreak for Miss Havisham. Magwitch is explicit in this regard: «it was a recompense to me... to know that I was making a gentleman » (p. 339).

So much of the reader's fairy-tale expectation is built upon money that to attack the power of money is to attack middle-class myth-making in all the forms it takes in this novel. Implicit in the fairy-tale expectations of Pip is the middle-class faith in social mobility upward. Pip is to rise above his class and does. Then Dickens arranges Estella's biography to demonstrate that she, too, rises to a level far beyond her parents', the convict Magwitch and Jagger's half-mad serving-woman. Magwitch, too, rises above his social origins, although in England he remains under proscription. Miss Havisham, too, has humbler origins. The brewery which must be the source of her financial independence is always associated in Pip's mind with Satis House. Indeed, Dickens furnishes the reader with an early presage of Miss Havisham's self-destruction when he has Pip envision her hanging from the beams of the family brewery. The brewery disappears only when Satis House does. Otherwise, they come as a package. Then, too, Estella and Magwitch suffer greatly, and Pip, no

longer a gentleman of leisure, ends by caring little for social position. Obviously, such a finale does not constitute a frontal attack on the entire class system of Western Europe. But the collective fate of the main characters is an object lesson in the vanity of belief in social mobility as an instrument of personal transformation guaranteed to produce happiness. Thus, as the final third of the novel makes clear, each challenge to the «stupendous power of money» eliminates another possibility of the projected fairy-tale narrative ever being realized.

The present discussion focuses on the reader's expectations: what gives rise to them and how they are discouraged in favour of the main narrative. Sooner or later, the reader of *Great Expectations* faces the chagrin of disappointed expectations. Why did Dickens design the text this way, though? And what are the effects on the reader of his own deflated expectations?

Perhaps these questions can best be answered, and this discussion best concluded, by making a final observation about the form and function of reader expectation constructed by this text. As the denouement makes clear, Pip's not fulfilling the reader's desire to see Estella swept into a passionate marriage is keyed to the collapse of the reader's estimate of the power of money as a means of personal transformation. But there is yet another perspective from which to view Dickens' play with reader expectations. And this perspective has as much to do with fairy tales as the pot-of-gold the reader sees in Pip's «great expectations». These expectations, though, have more to do with sex than with money. Specifically, Estella always seems to have an air of forbidden fruit about her. There is a kind of unspoken prohibition about her relation to Pip. And not just because Miss Havisham planned it that way. It is some other kind of prohibition. She is forbidden for the same reason —and upon the same ground— that she appears to the reader as available. Thus Estella seems most available when Pip comes into his «great expectations». Yet that is precisely when the reader assumes, along with Pip, that Miss Havisham is his fairy godmother, responsible for his good fortune. But, then, Estella is her stepdaughter. And if both Pip and Estella have the same mother, how are they related? Moreover, this same brother-sister configuration arises again when the proscribed Magwitch reappears in London and tells Pip that he is his «son». Then in the next breath, he announces that his money will help Pip win his lady's heart. Well, if Pip is his son and Estella is his daugther, what can take place between them? Dickens gives with one hand and takes away with the other when he plays upon the reader's expectations about sexual passion, just as he did with the expectations about Pip's newfound wealth. What, then, is Dickens saying about the reader's expectations?

He is probably saying something to the effect that terribly intense passions are self-limiting. The desire for both social position and sexual

love which the reader shares with Pip are understandable, and are never directly challenged by the text. Yet, if the course of events in the novel is made to chasten the reader's high expectations of the power of money, Dickens may be doing the same with the reader's expectations of the power of sexual passion. Dickens so arranges the plot that the reader's fantasy is entertained but not fulfilled, because it cannot be. For Pip to marry Estella at twenty-three years of age (as he is when Magwitch returns), would indeed be a fairy tale come true. According to that logic, the reader's implicit expectations of the power of sex would triumph, along with the power of money: an already self-isolated snob would marry a symbolic sibling, and sterility would be assured. It is clear that Dickens is not warring against money or sex, but against the reader's subscribing to cultural beliefs in both as forms of power. Once the infatuation is gone, along with the «great expectations», once their «parents» fade away, Pip finally gains possession of both a substantial income and the still-young Estella.

Only slowly does it become clear that the central battle being waged in *Great Expectations* is not so much Pip's quest for Estella's heart as it is the refinement of his own in the pursuit of hers. There are no magical transformations. That is why it is not a fairy tale. There are only changes of heart, patiently and painfully achieved. But the reader can arrive at such a conclusion only after completing the long denouement that constitutes the Third Part of the novel. For Dickens so designs the text that the reader only comes to see when Pip does. Thus the main effect on the reader of his own collapsed expectations is that his experience of Pip's biography takes up both narrative points of view: the view of the mature biographer looking back and the view of that younger self who is the main character in that biography. The reader's experience of Pip's biography, then, more closely patterns the protagonist's own. Further, Dickens wishes to demonstrate how seeing clearly is an end in its own right. To that end, the reader's vision is corrected by his eventually getting what he expected, thought not at all in the ways he expected he would. And that is precisely how Pip finally gets Estella.

Notes

1. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, (New York: New American Library, 1963). This and all subsequent references to the novel are taken from this edition.

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